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ABSTRACT

There are many resources available for supporting Title I or school-improvement processes, but many of them present a disjointed picture of the complicated process. This guidebook was developed to provide a coherent framework for planning educational improvement and can be used to support any school or district staff working to improve an education program and enhance student learning. The guidebook discusses details of the seven steps to the planning process: (1) prepare to plan; (2) know the situation; (3) build a knowledge base; (4) define a vision and develop strategies; (5) implement and move forward; (6) monitor progress; and (7) evaluate. The guide is based on the rationale that school improvement is in the interest of children; that a strong plan will focus on changes in curriculum and instruction; and that the potential for program success is enhanced if those most directly involved also contribute to and support its development. Thirteen tables and two figures (a sample planning matrix and planning-development worksheet) are included. (Contains 30 references.) (LMI)

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FOCUS ON SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

A PLANNING GUIDE

Far West Laboratory
for Educational Research and Development

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Far West Laboratory will join with Southwest Regional Laboratory in 1996 to become WestEd.

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About Us

(FWL) is a public non-profit educational research and development agency whose mission is to improve the quality of education by helping policy makers and practitioners apply the best available knowledge from research, development and practice.

The recently-awarded Region XI Comprehensive Assistance (CC) is one of many projects at the Laboratory. The central role of the new CC is to provide assistance to the SEA and LEAs on the evaluation and improvement of all programs under IASA. A large part of that work is providing direct assistance to schools engaged in improvement efforts. Far West Laboratory's approach to technical assistance focuses on the local school program, coordinates with other national and regional efforts, and provides a multi-level program of services through workshops, on-site consultations, correspondence and information dissemination. *Focus* is one example of materials available from the Far West Laboratory and the CC.

For More Information

If you would like more information, are interested in additional materials, or would like to order additional copies of *Focus*, please:

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Preface/ Introduction

Preface

Focus on School Improvement is a planning guide designed for any educator, parent, or policymaker who believes that an educational program can be improved, that it can in some way be changed in order to enhance the climate for learning. It is intended to be used by educators and parents who are interested in helping schools become places designed to effectively meet the needs of all students. While the guide was originally developed to assist educators who were working to improve Title I Compensatory Education programs, the process and strategies described can easily be adapted to educational programs of all types.

There are many resources and materials available for supporting Title I or school improvement processes, but many of them consist of pieces that are somewhat disjointed and fail to convey an understanding of a process that can be complicated and highly context-dependent. *Focus* was developed to provide a coherent framework for planning improvement. Improving an educational program or a school as a whole should not be undertaken in a piecemeal, fragmented fashion — with a consideration only of compliance issues or as a response to external demands. *Focus* approaches the process of planning for improvement as a reflective one, one that needs to be carefully thought out and planned within the context of a program's strengths and weaknesses. The process of improving a program need not be a protracted one, but it does need to be a thoughtful one. In some cases, a plan for improvement will be designed and implemented in a relatively short period of time, and the improvement outcomes will quickly become evident. To realize meaningful outcomes, however, plans should be developed following the general admonition, "pause, reflect, analyze, and design with care."

This guide was developed as part of a set of materials to support the efforts of anyone involved in the development of a plan for improving a program. Companion pieces include the following:

- a set of "tools" to support needs assessment or self-study activities;
- activities and materials to support the strategies described in *Focus*;
- a resource guide (with accompanying videotape) for schools planning or implementing a "Schoolwide Program" using federal Title I funds; and
- a report on school restructuring efforts in a set of California schools (*A View from the Bottom Up: School-Based Systemic Reform in California*).

Imagine schools as places where no children were considered to be 'at risk' of failure — places rich with learning opportunities for all of the children in them. Perhaps we would come to think of children in such schools as being at great risk of success.

Rightly viewed, school reform or improvement is an opportunity — one that is rich with potential — not only for enhancing children's learning, but also for improving staff dynamics, program operation, and the climate of the entire school.

While the planning guide can be used independently, the set of accompanying forms and activities provides many opportunities for active involvement of team members, guidance for assessment processes, and support for exploring or enhancing a particular aspect of the educational program.

If you are an educator engaged in program design and modification, or if you are a parent who cares very much about the education of children, we invite you to review this guide. Share it with others who might benefit. Use it in any way that seems likely to improve education for children and adolescents. Request any of the companion pieces that you think will support your efforts. Let us know how we might revise these materials. Most of all, let us know if we can help to support your reform efforts. This is an opportunity — one none of us should miss.

Rightly viewed, school reform or improvement is an opportunity — one that is rich with potential — not only for enhancing children's learning, but also for improving staff dynamics, program operation, and the climate of the entire school. In recent years, terms such as "restructuring" and "systemic reform" have been used to describe and to recommend school improvement processes. Some states have passed legislation to support school reform efforts. Others have established reward or sanction systems to encourage improvement. This swirl of activities around school reform often masks the value of these efforts as an opportunity to focus on improvement.

This guide was originally designed to support Chapter 1 (now Title I) practitioners who were required to engage in a process of program improvement. (Under the *Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988*, program improvement became a requirement for any school supported by federal Chapter 1 funds in which student achievement gains did not meet state-set criterion standards.) It soon became clear as more and more educators became familiar with and used the first edition that it can be a useful guide for anyone engaged in school improvement efforts. Thus, the guide was *re-focused* to support any school or district staff working to improve an educational program and enhance student learning. While there are references to Title I programs throughout *Focus*, the information is generally applicable to any improvement effort.

In some ways, the process of school improvement is similar to that described by use of the word, *retrofit*. For some time, architects and other solar designers have been examining ways to retrofit houses and other buildings to take better advantage of solar energy. The word, itself, describes something that is "fitted" after the fact, in retrospect. It seems to apply well to the redesign of school programs — to take advantage of "new light" in the

form of new research or information that will contribute to the design of a better program. When a house needs to be retrofitted, the designers and homeowners are concerned with how to evaluate, plan, design, rearrange, and add to, the elements of the house, so that it becomes more effective in using the sun's energy. Similarly, a school improvement planning team will be concerned with how to assess, plan and redesign a school so that it is more effective in increasing student learning.

Just as existing houses were built the way they were for a variety of reasons — including architectural styles, neighborhood standards, building practices of the period in which they were built — school programs have adhered to some structural elements related to interpretations of the federal regulations. Houses built in the traditional model did not reflect the ability of the house to use the sun's energy; likewise school programs were not always designed and have not often been "retrofitted" to make use of the best and most recent knowledge about how children learn.

Architects also know that plans for improvement will have a much greater chance of satisfactory results if adequate time is spent in activities such as reviewing background information, examining the site and its conditions, and considering the needs of the inhabitants. In the same way, it is extremely important to spend sufficient time in the preliminary phases of school improvement — gathering background information, reviewing and analyzing data, identifying strengths and weaknesses of the program, and assessing all programs within the school context — if we want to achieve the rewards of a successful improvement plan.

It is also important to remember that school improvement is a healthy and rewarding process. When school staffs are confronted with the need to improve the entire school program, they often question the usefulness of the process. Sometimes this results in discussions centered on ways to avoid the process or to "get through it" with a minimum of effort and in a short time. Going through a careful and thorough school improvement process, however, offers a unique opportunity to develop strategies that will improve educational programs. Any educational program should be reviewed regularly and operate under a continuous program of improvement. (Title I programs are required to review the progress of participating students on an annual basis.) The lives and learning of students, including those often considered to be "at risk," are at stake. Nothing less than the best possible program is acceptable — for all children.

To summarize, all educators should give constant attention to the needs of students, to the strengths and weaknesses of an educational program, and to potential strategies for improving

that program. School improvement planning will be most productive if it is approached with an attitude that supports the notion that:

> **School improvement is a healthy process. It's about getting better. It's about doing what's best to improve learning for children. Seize the opportunity!**

There is a wide range of educational materials available that can help to stimulate discussion of improvement issues. Remember that your neighborhood, school, students, and staff are unique. What works somewhere else will probably not be appropriate in exactly the same form. Your retrofitted "house" will look very different from someone else's, but it should suit the needs of its "occupants," and its features should contribute to the well-being of all those inside.

Table 1
Improvement Planning Guidelines

I. Prepare to plan
II. Assess: Know the situation
III. Learn: Build a knowledge base
IV. Plan: Define a vision and develop strategies
V. Implement: Move forward
VI. Monitor: How are you doing?
VII. Evaluate: How did you do?

What are some basic assumptions?

This planning and implementation guide is founded on several basic assumptions. The rationale for these assumptions will be elaborated throughout. It is important to keep these assumptions in mind as you develop, refine and implement your plans. The assumptions are as follows:

- School improvement should be undertaken from the point of view that it is in the interest of children.
- A strong plan will have a major emphasis on changes in curriculum and instruction.
- The potential for the success of a program is enhanced if it is developed and supported by those most directly involved in the program.
- Building in early opportunities for success contributes to the potential for maintenance and improvement.
- If it is determined that a plan of improvement needs to be developed for a particular program, consideration should be given to the potential fit with other improvement plans undertaken in a school or district.
- Strong support from stakeholder groups is essential.
- Appropriate goal-setting is a critical element of a plan with high potential for success.
- A plan that is carefully developed includes specifications for tasks, responsibilities, timelines, and monitoring.

What are some school improvement planning guidelines?

Table 1 highlights seven steps that will guide you through the improvement process. These steps are not a magic formula or process, nor are they intended to be implemented in a lock-step, totally linear fashion. Decisions as to next steps and actions to take at particular points in time must be made with reference to the individual context of the school and what you are learning. In this Guide, we have merely identified seven key components to *any* planning process. The steps described in this guide will allow you to develop a carefully thought out, well-researched, and comprehensive plan for improvement. It will also provide information regarding implementation and the monitoring and evaluation of the planned improvements.

Notes

I

Prepare: Plan to Plan

Establish a Leadership Team

Understand the Goals of School Improvement

Build a Preliminary Profile

Summarize and Build Enthusiasm to Go Forward

I Prepare: Plan to Plan

The first phase in a meaningful plan involves laying the groundwork for all other phases and setting the tone for subsequent activities. Therefore, Step I is to prepare, **Plan to Plan.** This step or phase includes four main components. They are:

1. Establish a school improvement leadership team.
2. Review existing data and develop an understanding of the need for school improvement.
3. Construct a preliminary program/school profile based on current perceptions.
4. Build enthusiasm for moving forward in the process.

Establish a Leadership Team

A leadership group should be formed that will be committed to working through the detailed process of improvement planning. The team should consist of, but not be limited to, representatives from the district and school administration, regular and special programs (including teachers, assistants, and specialists), and parents. This team should be small — at least three, but not more than five or six. It should bring together people who have different backgrounds, skills, and knowledge and who can work together toward a common goal.

Referring back to the example in the Introduction of the architect's retrofit process, contractors and subcontractors who specialize in various aspects of construction are involved in the development of a retrofit plan. They each bring a unique perspective and area of expertise to the process. Similarly, a range of perspectives and areas of expertise are very valuable, if not vital, to the development of a strong plan for improvement.

Forming the team is a step in the process that is open to a variety of approaches, but it should not be approached in a cavalier way, for example, selecting only those who routinely volunteer. It will depend on the scope and design of the program, but frequently, the principal forms the team. She or he may solicit peer nominations, extend personal invitations, or call for volunteers. Ideally, it should be done in consultation with others who may have information about who would be most able to contribute to and support the process.

Choosing the team members may present a challenge. There are often many talented individuals from which to choose. For example, there are usually many school and district staff that could contribute technical expertise in curriculum and instruction or testing and evaluation issues. Moreover, in any Title I program, there are a number of teachers and instructional assistants capable of sharing their knowledge and special

understanding of the needs of the program and its students. Existing leadership or planning teams could also be excellent sources from which to draw individuals to join in the school improvement effort. Many parents may be able to offer insights on school programs. Who should be chosen depends on local conditions. In general, team members should be chosen on the basis of their ability to: (1) contribute a unique perspective on the school improvement process, and (2) devote a reasonable amount of time to planning and implementation.

A strong leadership team will exhibit many of the following characteristics. The team should:

- have a vision and clarity of purpose,
- be creative,
- be willing to take risks,
- be able to withstand setbacks,
- be able to mobilize people and resources,
- maintain an optimistic attitude,
- stay committed to the goals of school improvement,
- maintain a sense of humor.

Table 2
Characteristics of a Strong Leadership Team

focused
creative
risk-tasking
motivating and resourceful
optimistic
committed
sense of humor

Once formed, the leadership team should garner additional support from interested individuals who can offer unique talents and/or insights. For example, if a regular classroom teacher is not able to attend most of the meetings, yet has expertise in a certain area that no other team member has, this teacher could serve as a resource and be involved in the review of the plans. Support for school improvement efforts should be enlisted from any individuals who are interested in improving student learning. Support can be provided by other school or district staff, students, parents, and other "experts." This "support group" will serve as a valuable source of information and feedback. Whereas the leadership team will be involved in every step of the school improvement process from start to finish, the support group participates when possible and as tasks dictate.

Many different structures for leadership teams can work to involve teachers, principals, students, and staff in shared decisionmaking. Another idea is to divide the work between "study teams" and "implementation teams." Study teams take responsibility for researching and making recommendations about specific approaches to achieving the school vision and goals. They may investigate new instructional strategies or programs, visit schools that have implemented such programs, analyze costs and conduct feasibility studies, or construct overall timelines for the plan. Implementation teams, on the other hand, are formed to give the recommendations meaning and to guide implementation within their purview, e.g., subject

area or student groupings. If, for example, the plan for a high school is to integrate subject matter with team teaching across the disciplines, the implementation teams should consist of integrated team members and not be set up by subject matter areas. The leadership team, then, integrates the recommendations and helps ensure congruence with the school mission, vision, beliefs, and values. This group which is most often made up of team leaders from action teams, administrators, and school community representatives, can ensure that the implementation of the new strategies flows in an articulated fashion.

The leadership team should maintain regular communication with the whole school community — school faculty, administrators, and parents. The team should keep the community well informed about the process and their need for support. At the same time, members of the community can provide ideas and feedback to the team planning school improvement. A system of communication should be developed so that this flow of information occurs regularly. It may be through a newsletter update or through "town meetings."

Involving other staff in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the school improvement process not only helps the leadership team to identify resources within the community, but also helps the team to "sell" the idea of change and growth to the rest of the staff. A sense of community is created by involving as many people as possible in a variety of ways. Staff, parents, students, and others feel valued.

As the team begins to work together, it is often helpful to identify roles of *all* the individuals involved. For example, it may be helpful if the team decides who will lead discussions, who will take notes, who will track schedules, who will communicate with the larger school community, who will gather feedback, and so on. In many cases, these roles will develop naturally as individuals' strengths and interests become apparent. The roles may also be rotated within the group. Individuals may want to take turns facilitating the sessions, which can help to establish a balance in the sense of control and responsibility. Each team member being clear on her or his role as well as on the roles of other team members, facilitates communication and greatly reduces the potential for duplication, confusion, or non-productive activity.

It is important to remember that teams do not automatically fall into place and "hit the ground running." Initial apprehension and confusion may occur, but do not let this deter you from moving forward. Some team members may feel overwhelmed by the process or the diagnostic procedures involved. Others may feel defensive about the school

[T]he leadership team should garner additional support from interested individuals who can offer unique talents and/or insights.

Support for school improvement efforts should be enlisted from any individuals who are interested in improving student learning.

improvement requirement and be resistant to change. Moreover, finding adequate time to gather and review data may be an issue for team members. There are several ways to alleviate these potential difficulties:

- To save time and limit duplicated efforts, divide tasks among the team members so that everyone is responsible for part of the self-study rather than requiring joint efforts on all activities.
- To garner support and fresh ideas and to maintain motivation, build a network with other schools for ideas as well as collegial support.
- To increase understanding of school improvement processes and other related topics, take advantage of inservice and consulting services available through the SEA and other service agencies or universities to build the knowledge base of everyone involved.
- To stay on track or ensure that tasks are completed, establish a feasible timeline, and schedule release time for team members as a strategy to remove lack-of-time anxieties. Set short-term goals with clear lines of responsibility.
- To work as a team and maintain morale, create an atmosphere that invites risk-taking and gives everyone the opportunity to share their expertise, concerns, and needs, as well as successes.

It may be necessary to engage in team-building or consensus-building activities or skill-builders in order to ensure effective coordination and collaboration. An effective team establishes goals collaboratively, engages in direct and open two-way communication, allows leadership to be distributed among all team members through the assignment of tasks or participation in different teams, uses effective decision-making procedures, and develops a climate of equitable power and influence.

While voting as a way of making decisions is familiar and often easier, working toward consensus can lead to better decisions and more successful implementation. Keep the following suggestions in mind:

1. Avoid arguing in order to "win" as individuals. The best judgment is the judgment of the group as a whole.
2. Disagreement and conflict should be viewed as helping rather than hindering the process of reaching consensus. Only through discussion will all viewpoints be heard and evaluated.

3. Concentrate on practicing your task and relationship skills. Make sure that everyone gets heard.
4. "Harmonizing" can be helpful, but be sure not to prematurely smooth over meaningful conflict.

If it seems like it would be helpful to planning group members, you may want to search for resources or assistance on strategies for consensus building, conflict management, or conflict resolution. Such assistance is often available from regional assistance centers, laboratories, state departments of education, county offices of education, or district-level staff develop specialists.

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DURING A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SESSION to assist leadership teams with developing school improvement plans, the teachers and administrators participated in a "jigsaw" using an article on school change, and watched a video on outstanding schools. After each activity, the participants discussed how the materials and information could be presented to their colleagues at their respective schools, and how it could be used to best meet their needs. In the afternoon, about fifty people, organized in small groups around tables, worked on tasks related to writing school improvement plans. Many papers were scattered about, and huge three ring-binders stuffed with multi-colored documents were on every table. Facilitators wandered around the room, answered questions, and made suggestions, checking on the progress of the working groups at the tables. Although not everyone was exactly "on task," they were all talking about conditions and situations at their respective schools.

Eventually, the groups started to phase out, packing up their papers, books, binders and bags to leave. As one of the facilitators made the final announcements of the day, wishing everyone well and urging them to return the following March, one of the participants, a seasoned teacher, approached one of the other facilitator: "Thank you so much. For the first time we felt that we were being treated like professionals."

❦ ❦ ❦

Before moving ahead in the planning process, one final preparation step is needed. The planning process will require

Table 3
Key Questions

1. Who should be involved and why?
2. What sort of management procedures will the team use?
3. What are the roles, levels and types of involvement of each team member?
4. Have any potential participant groups been overlooked? Parents? Students?
5. Is the team clear on how decisions will be made?
6. How will the team communicate with one another? With the rest of the school? The community?

Focus improvement efforts on instruction.

many decisions. For example, decisions must be made about which assessment tools to use, what to do with the results, which areas to assess, what to include in the plan, and how to implement it. If careful thought is not given to how decisions will be made, the most important steps of the improvement process will be lost.

The type of leadership team described here lends itself to a form of participatory decision making, a process whereby a small representative group of a larger organization makes decisions with input from others concerned. A participatory or collaborative decision-making process allows all individuals involved — directly or indirectly — to feel that their contributions or opinions are valued. This leads to broad support for the process and plan.

Remember, whatever its final composition, a major responsibility of the school improvement team is to provide leadership throughout the various phases of the improvement process — from planning activities to evaluating results and developing ownership for the plan throughout the school community. It is important that participants understand their roles and responsibilities, know the purpose and process of planning, and maintain a realistic picture of time commitments. Table 3 reviews some of the key questions to address before proceeding with the process.

Understand the Goals of School Improvement

Think about something important you have wanted to accomplish. What was a primary requirement? If you wanted to make something or get somewhere, you had to identify the goal or outcomes of interest. If you wanted to learn a new skill, such as playing tennis, the look and feel of a quality serve or volley guided your practice. Architects likewise need to develop a picture of how a house should look or be "configured" to be energy-efficient. In the same way, it is essential to have a clear picture of what a successful school will look like, what the outcome will be and how school improvement fits with this vision. To reach the goal, consider essential resources and strategies that will take you there.

Planning and implementing a process of improvement should be based on a thorough understanding of state and district policies and school reform efforts, as well as legal requirements of any state or federal-funded programs. A familiarity with current research on successful programs and on effective educational practices is also essential. It is important to give some thought to the general goals and intent of specific programs, such as Title I, bilingual or ESL, special education, or other. You should certainly also give consideration to your own ideals and your

vision of what you would like to accomplish for children in your school. It helps to keep those lofty ideas in mind.

It is also important to emphasize at this point the important goal of school improvement: *to improve learning opportunities for children*. With that goal kept firmly in mind, it is critical to think about the heart of the matter, the essentials. In this case, the essential aspect is instruction — the teaching-learning process. If a plan for improving a program or school is not based on a careful review of the instructional strategies being used, it is unlikely that desired outcomes will be the result. Extensive efforts to explore current information on effective instructional strategies in reading, writing, math, and other content areas are the key to success.

This is not to say that you should not include strategies in your plan for improving parent involvement, leadership, coordination, monitoring, and so forth. These aspects also contribute in significant ways to a strong program and to children's learning. However, if these factors are considered with no thought given to the instructional program, it is less likely that the desired improvement in learning will occur.

Build a Preliminary Profile

A profile is a portrait of the school. It describes its key characteristics. It summarizes the initial perceptions of leadership team members as they respond to questions about the structure, content, and climate of the school and the programs within that school. The purpose of building a preliminary profile is to gauge current perceptions of team members and others in the school community. This should be an *informal* process and will indicate how well participants understand or perceive the current situation in the school. Remember the house an architect or builder is planning to retrofit? He may have an idea for what could be done, but he must study the climate of the region and geographical features of the site. He may have to order soil tests or gather information about specific building materials and their feasibility for intended purposes. But initially, he will certainly talk to the occupants about their goals and current perceptions about how well the house serves their needs. This step serves a similar purpose in the school improvement process. It provides a backdrop for the planning process.

In no way should this process limit the discussion and exploration of potentially productive strategies for changing the program. For example, if perceptions of the current instructional program are generally positive, this finding should not dismiss the need to consider instructional improvements.

As you work in a team, you must realize that every member brings his or her own perceptions to the team. To each of us, our perceptions are our truths. As a team member, we must recognize that our perceptions are not necessarily the perceptions of others on the team. This is a time for sharing and understanding one another's views and to find a common ground from which to build. The development of a preliminary profile will facilitate this part of the process.

Summarize and Build Enthusiasm to Go Forward

Leadership team organized, roles and responsibilities clarified, purpose and goals outlined, and situation defined — now it is time to move forward. If barriers still exist, pause to consider whether they pose too much of a hindrance to move forward. If so, work a bit more on finding solutions. It may mean reconstituting the team, bringing in a moderator, or gathering more data on the program. If the barriers are minor, consider forging ahead. The process itself often reveals strategies for overcoming them. Keep your lofty goals in mind and take the high road.

II

Assess: Know the Situation

What are the Areas to be Assessed?

What Methods and Tools Can Be Used to Conduct the Assessment?

How Do You Build a Profile?

Compare to Preliminary Profile

II Assess: Know the Situation

The goal of this type of inquiry should be a profile of the school with a review of its strengths and weaknesses in meeting the needs of the students it serves.

Good planning for school improvement is predicated on a well-grounded assessment of needs, sometimes referred to as the process of "taking stock" or conducting a self-study. If your school is eligible to use Title I funds to run a Schoolwide Program,[1] completing a "comprehensive needs assessment" during the planning year is required. The processes that are described in this section would provide a framework for this activity.

In the retrofit of a house, a "needs assessment" process would involve conducting a site analysis to determine the orientation of a house's south wall and shading factors; an architectural analysis to determine construction elements and measurements; climate; and economics. Without this needs assessment, a solar retrofit plan is unlikely to ensure maximum solar gain. Similarly, without a systematic and reasonable process for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a school program, the risk increases that improvement plans will be misdirected from the start. Through the efforts of a team of concerned educators and parents, coupled with the activities of the larger school community, the problem of low achievement within a school can be thoroughly analyzed, and appropriate plans for change can be conceived and developed.

This needs assessment or *self-study* serves the purpose of identifying and clarifying the specific areas of poor performance by providing an in-depth analysis of the program or the school as a whole and its level of success in accelerating student achievement. A good needs assessment requires that team members consider multiple sources and types of information that supply many different types of data on the school and its students. The goal of this type of inquiry should be to develop a profile of the school with a review of its strengths and weaknesses in meeting the needs of the students it serves.

All aspects of the school program from staff assignments to instructional materials should be open for discussion. Four general areas of assessment can serve as a framework for the assessment. Consideration should be given to all of these areas in order to develop an effective improvement plan.

What are the areas to be assessed?

The areas that will be assessed will vary somewhat from one school to another, and the amount of time and effort spent

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[1] To be eligible, a school must have data (free or reduced-price lunch or AFDC) to demonstrate a 50 percent or greater poverty level for its student population.

in each area will likewise vary to a considerable extent. Other factors than those subsumed under the following general areas may be considered depending on the needs of the situation. It is often wise to use background information that can help you determine how well your school compares to other schools described as successful. The information serves as another backdrop against which you can splash the elements of your own school program and use the comparisons to pose important improvement questions. Such a backdrop might be drawn from the research on effective schools or a model for a "restructured" school such as those proposed as Henry Levin's "Accelerated Schools" model or Robert Slavin's "Success for All." Descriptions of effective schools are available from a variety of sources, including the U.S. Department of Education (e.g., "Blue Ribbon" schools and the *Effective Compensatory Education Sourcebook, Vols. I-V*). Contact your local assistance center or laboratory for additional resources.

Table 4
Areas to be Assessed

- Program design, support and administration
- Curriculum and instruction
- Assessment and evaluation
- Out-of-school environment

Program Design, Support and Administration

The first area to examine is the structure of the school and its programs. This area, including design, support and administration, requires an assessment of the goals and objectives of the school programs; coordination of programs; leadership — both instructional and administrative; mechanisms for recognizing excellence; opportunities for professional development and training; and school and program climate. In addition, serious thought should be given to service delivery models used in the various programs of the school. For example, are special services provided through pull-out models? Has thought been given to ways to extend time for instruction using before and after-school models or others? It is important to center some discussion on alternative models and options for operating the school's programs other than in the ways you "always have."

In Title I programs, much more thought is being given to the use of flexible models — alternatives that fit the school and students best. Considerable information exists about alternative models, including those that fall into the category of "extended time," such as before- and after-school programs, summer and "Saturday school" programs, and instructional variations such as peer tutoring.

Curriculum and Instruction

A second critical area is the instructional program and the curriculum on which it is based. Assessment in this area focuses on the suitability and effectiveness of instructional materials,

methods and approaches. This should involve an examination or exploration of current research and thinking on effective practices for teaching, especially in the areas of reading, writing, and math. Some thought should be given to the degree of coherence in the school or grade-level philosophy that governs daily instruction. This examination should also include a consideration of classroom management strategies, including expectations for student achievement and coordination among programs. Topics such as staff development and use of academic learning time should be reviewed.

As your school engages in a process of change and reviews student performance data, it becomes clear that a primary focus on the improvement of curriculum and instruction is vital to success. This means, however, that teachers and administrators have to take a careful and honest look at everything they are doing in the instructional program, and examine its coherence and relevance to what they want to accomplish. This should all be examined in connection with ways in which learning progress is assessed. In other words, the leadership team needs to have information about what philosophy guides the curriculum, how instruction is provided, and in what ways teachers determine what students have learned.

Assessment and Evaluation Strategies

A third focal area is the monitoring and evaluation system. An appraisal of this area involves asking questions such as: Is student progress closely monitored? Are feedback and positive reinforcements provided to students, parents, and staff? In what ways are evaluation results used to effect improvements in the school's programs? Do assessment results for certain students or groups of students imply particular success or needs? Are the instruments that are used to measure student success closely tied to the curriculum and to classroom instruction? Have multiple assessment measures been identified and integrated in a comprehensive assessment system? These and other similar questions will allow you to move beyond compliance and focus on the use of assessment and evaluation data to design a school program that better serves children's needs.[2]

Table 5
Assessment Methods and Tools

Achievement Data
Self-assessments
Observations
Interviews
Curriculum Review

[2] Please note that in this section, we use "assessment" to mean the instruments used to collect data or information about current practices, achievement or other aspects of a program. We use "evaluation" to mean the collection of information to draw conclusions or make judgments about a program.

Figure 1
Sample Planning Matrix
Assessment Areas to Consider and Correspondence Tools

SCHOOLWIDE PROJECT COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT PLANNING MATRIX

DIMENSIONS OF SCHOOL PROFILE	SOURCES OF INFORMATION							
	Self Assessments	Observations	Interviews and/or Surveys	School Records	Group Discussion	Evaluation Data/Reports	Other Plans & Reports	Student Work
Student Demographics								
Students' Achievement								
Curriculum and Instruction								
Professional Demographics								
Professional Development								
School Organization								
Family/Parent Involvement								

Out-of-School Environment

The fourth category of assessment is the out-of-school environment. Often this area is overlooked. However, a school does not operate in a vacuum; a school's context is set by its community and students as well as by educators. Information about the economic, social, and emotional climate in which students live outside of school can be valuable in understanding needs. A wealth of information is generally available about a school's community; often educators are unaware of this information and work from assumptions about student and community life.

Schools that seek to prepare students to live and work in the information age do well to establish partnerships with business, the community, and parents. These partnerships can make instructional programs exciting and relevant to the purpose of developing students into successful citizens and quality workers. Partnerships help to reinforce learning at home and may provide solutions to some of the problems teachers face when trying to teach children who are not prepared to learn.

Partnerships can provide schools with information to guide curriculum and instruction, and can help schools set priorities and achieve goals. Business, community groups, and parents are all clients of the school; involving clients in the continuous improvement of the product (the students) enables schools to make use of talents, resources, and advice from people who have a vested interest. To create and maintain successful partnerships, schools must be clear about why they want partnerships, what they want the partnerships to accomplish, and what the *partners* will get out of the partnership. Answers to these questions are needed in order to construct effective partnerships.

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IN A LARGE AUDITORIUM, about seventy-five parents, teachers and school-level administrators are individually rating their parent involvement program. After the individual work is done, they group together by school to compare and discuss their ratings. The discussions are lively, but not heated. All of the parents in attendance are quite vocal, and it is clear that in several of the groups, the views of the parents are different from the viewpoints of the school staff.

When asked to reconvene into a full group, the major point of the discussion is the value of having different people and perspectives as part of the evaluation of a program. In this case, the participants gained understanding of specific strengths and weaknesses of their program from different perspectives, which provided greater depth of understanding about that aspect of their total school program.

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WHAT METHODS AND TOOLS CAN BE USED TO CONDUCT THE ASSESSMENT?

Modifying the instructional program requires careful strategic planning that is based on accurate information and a broad-based understanding of the program's strengths and weaknesses. The program and current practices should be assessed using a range of procedures that may include a review and analysis of achievement data, self-assessments, observations, interviews, a curriculum review, portfolios, and

other achievement data (Table 5). Which method you choose will depend on what you are assessing, the type of information you want to gather, the available resources and the time involved. The key is not to rely on only one method to gather all there is to know. For example, you may decide to use observations to gather information about classroom management and instructional techniques, distribute surveys to gauge parent attitudes, and rate self-assessment checklists to identify curricular gaps. Figure 1 is an example of a planning matrix designed to help you decide which tools to use and ensure that you consider a number of alternatives.

Achievement Data

In most cases, those who are developing a school improvement plan do so because they want to improve student achievement. It is often a useful procedure to review student assessment data to ensure that all members of a leadership team are aware of the results. It is also worthwhile to disaggregate the data or pull it apart to determine where the needs are greatest. That is, are the scores lower in particular subject areas, at particular grade levels, for particular classrooms or instructional approaches, or for particular groups of students? It is often possible to examine strengths and weaknesses in specific skill areas or for particular types of items. Disaggregation can also provide information regarding different aspects of the program or different types of instruction. This process can be very useful, but it is wise not to become so involved in this process that viable strategies for improvement are overshadowed or given inadequate attention.

The curricular area(s) on which to focus improvement efforts may have already been determined by the local review of the school or will be selected based on the results of the annual review. In either case, examination of achievement data can help to pinpoint subtopics of the curriculum and grade levels in which students have been successful or areas that are in need of attention.

Self-assessments

Often self-assessments are conducted using surveys, questionnaires, or interview protocols that include specific questions about various aspects of the school program (e.g., coordination, parent involvement, and reading and math instruction). These assessments allow you to rate your school's programs and identify areas of needed improvement. Statements such as: "The main goal of the reading curriculum is to teach reading comprehension and to teach word recognition

skills within that context;" or "There is sufficient time allocated for Title I or other supplemental instruction to meet the goals of the program" are examples of items that individuals are asked to rate. A good self-assessment strategy is to have individuals rate program aspects independently. Then the leadership team can discuss the ratings assigned to arrive at general consensus on the rankings. Again this will allow for greater understanding of the school program.

Observations

Observations are a useful method for understanding students' experiences in school. Observations can provide information on what students do in various programs (e.g., Title I, Bilingual or Special Education) and classes, use of instructional time, the nature of instruction, and the appropriateness and coherence of the curriculum. Many teachers and researchers express considerable surprise when they have actually observed a student's instructional experiences throughout his or her school. Some years ago, for example, Richard Allington and his colleagues conducted research[3] in which they found that regular classroom teachers and Title I teachers were totally unaware of what went on in each others' classrooms, what instructional approaches were being used, or what was expected of students in the two different settings.

Interviews

Interviews with key people can add another dimension to the study of a school. By asking open-ended questions, people can share ideas without constraints. These ideas may provide new insights or help confirm other data gathered. Some key people to interview include: students who are current or former participants of the various programs, parents, classroom teachers, administrators, non-classroom staff, and district program consultants.

Curriculum Review

Another method for assessing current practices in the program and their effectiveness is a curriculum review. In some cases, it will be determined that an up-to-date, meaningful, or

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[3] Allington, R.L. and Shake, M.C. (March, 1986). Remedial reading: Achieving curricular congruence in classroom and clinic. *The Reading Teacher*, 648-654.

coherent curriculum does not, in fact, exist. This should immediately alert the team to the need for the development or adoption of a curriculum. The curriculum should be a comprehensive statement of the school's philosophy, goals and objectives, and instructional framework. In some cases, it may be that certain of the elements are there, but not all. Occasionally, a curriculum exists, but it is not used. The team should evaluate the situation to determine why this is the case. A particularly important question to answer is whether an existing curriculum reflects the most current and substantive research and thinking. For example, are children asked to work with drill and practice sheets or are they actively engaged in group activities and hands-on experiences that challenge them to think? Reference to current national efforts to establish curriculum outcomes (content standards) in various content areas would be valuable. The development of "content standards" or statements about what students should "know and be able to do" in different subject areas is required under Title I of the *Improving America's Schools Act* as well as *Goals 2000* (federal legislation currently supporting development efforts in most states). The development of these standards provides an important framework for schools to use in re-designing the instructional program and in developing a comprehensive assessment system.

How do you Build a Profile?

Once the data — both quantitative and qualitative — have been gathered and analyzed, it is important to build a profile of the program. This profile is different from the more informal one developed in the first step or phase (**Prepare: Plan to Plan**) of this process. This profile describes how well a school is functioning, how well it matches intended outcomes, and the specific areas for improvement. Now is the time for a process heralded in much research on effective education — *reflection*. Take the time to give some careful thought to all that you have learned and the questions you still have. Take care to describe carefully the situation as it exists and the needs to be addressed in your plan for improvement. (See also discussion of "School Portfolios" in **Step VII: Evaluate**.)

It is very likely that if you've gotten this far in the process and you're reviewing this guide that you will be asking, "Why do we need to do this? Isn't this redundant and just some more busy work?" These feelings are understandable. You've been gathering lots of information, working together as a team, and talking, talking, talking about your school and its programs. The problem is that discussions often go in many different directions, interpretations commonly differ, and consensus is

not always seen as the goal. For these reasons, it is a good idea to spend a little time describing what you have found out through the self-study and what you have learned from discussions and developing a synthesis of this information. You may still not agree, but you are beginning to focus your planning efforts.

The Profile may take many different forms. It may be a simple narrative with accompanying data represented in survey results, graphs, or the like. It may include "minority reports" or opinions if someone feels strongly that she or he doesn't agree with the summary statement developed by the group. You may want to be more creative here. Some people have used pictures or sketches to depict the various aspects of their school. These can capture the situation quite effectively — whether they have artistic merit or not. Again, you may want to consider developing a School Portfolio.

The point is to work together to develop this synthesis, strive to reach a point where most or all of you agree that the Profile describes the program and how the information you gathered contributes to that depiction. It should include indicators of strengths and weaknesses or barriers to be overcome. This gives you baseline information and a solid starting point to use in refining and renewing your school program.

Compare to preliminary profile

Since a preliminary profile was built during the first step of this process, it is important to compare it to the one developed in this step. This will allow you to identify initial assumptions and whether or not the data support them. A better understanding of your school should emerge. People often discover that what they always assumed to be true about their school program was not, in fact, true, or they realize that perceptions differ markedly depending on the information available or used. This can be a powerful team-building activity, in that it can strengthen relations and settle potential differences. It isn't necessary to overdo or spend too much time on this activity; it simply serves as another way to frame the discussion.

Notes

III

Learn: Build a Knowledge Base

Moving On . . .

Know the Research

Build a Network/ Support System

Don't Get Buried . . .

Moving On . . .

Now that you know what works well and not so well in your school, the next step is to fill the knowledge gaps identified in your self-study process. It is difficult to develop a strong improvement plan with great potential for success if you are not familiar with current information about effective strategies, practices, and programs. To jump into planning at this stage can be premature and may move you along a garden path that doesn't lead to productive change or may produce unintended outcomes. Thus, before any significant plans are developed, you must build a strong knowledge base.

Needless to say, there is an enormous amount of information available, so it is important to approach this task with a clear head and two main strategies. First, tap a variety of sources of information, such as regional assistance centers, state departments of education, research centers, laboratories, or knowledgeable individuals in your district, school or on the planning team. Don't let the amount of information overwhelm or discourage you. Second, read and review the information as a critical consumer. This second strategy is most important. Evaluate carefully what you hear and read. Discuss it with your team members. Take this opportunity to do some research, read reflectively, and have professional discussions with your colleagues. Too often people jump to a solution because they read a brief description that sounds good, or someone gives them a strong "pitch" for a particular strategy or program.

Know the Research

Research on effective practices should guide the discussion and inform decision making during this phase of school improvement planning. The research can provide information about characteristics of programs and strategies that have been proven effective. This, in turn, will allow you to formulate plans based on local conditions. If a team or a team member becomes intrigued by a particular improvement model or strategy, it is good policy to seek more information about it through a review of evidence or interviews with others who have used it.

Remember to approach research or other information with caution. Findings should be examined with reference to the population with whom the practices were said to be effective and how the study was conducted. Some information describing program models or strategies is persuasive but is not based on careful research or classroom evidence.

A good idea is to find reviews that critique and synthesize research, often offering suggestions for classroom implications. Team members should base their judgments as to the relevance

III Learn: Build a Knowledge Base

. . . before any significant plans are developed, you must build a strong knowledge base.

Team members should base their judgments as to the relevance of particular research findings for their local programs on their professional experience and understanding of local conditions.

Research has focused on several topics that are potential target areas for productive school improvement plans (Table 6). Various "truths" may be distilled from them — too numerous to list here. However, a very brief synopsis of these research areas is provided below.

Team members should base their judgments as to the relevance of particular research findings for their local programs on their professional experience and understanding of local conditions.

Table 6
Research Areas to Consider

Program Design
Curriculum and Instruction
Coordination
Parent Involvement
Evaluation and Assessment
Professional Development

Program Design

Over time, schools have used a wide range of service delivery strategies, grouping mechanisms, and other structural features to design their overall program. Historically, Title I and many other special programs have commonly been set up using "pull-out" models of service delivery almost exclusively. Tracking is another model that has been used to group students so that a narrower range of abilities would be represented by the students in a classroom. Criticisms of such models have resulted in an increasing number of schools implementing alternative models of service delivery and grouping.

The purchase of instructional materials or the training of staff are only two steps in the process of developing a program. Schools must also consider an *approach* to serving their students that fits the needs and context of the situation. There are several service delivery models that schools have used. These models fall roughly into four categories (Table 7).

Models Based on Setting. These types of models include ones based on segregating groups of students for particular purposes, grouping within classrooms, and organizing students into "families," "academies," or other groups that are generally ones that remain together for particular purposes and to make things more manageable for everyone. "In-class" models provide additional instructional services to students in their regular classroom, while pull-out models provide additional services outside the regular classroom in a different classroom or other study area. In these models, service delivery is based on *where* students receive support.

Models Based on Extended Time. These are commonly referred to as add-on programs. These types of programs provide instructional or support services before or after school, during the summer, on week-ends, or during an intersession in year-round schools. Programs of this type allow delivery of services outside the regular school schedule and add on to the time students spend in school. These models are based on *when* students receive services.

Models Based on Staffing Patterns. Programs can be staffed by regular classroom teachers, instructional assistants, resource teachers, specialists, parent or other volunteers, or any combination of these. A school can decide to use any staffing pattern that it deems useful and effective. These models are based on *who* delivers the services.

Models Based on Instructional Approaches. A school's overall instructional program may include several different approaches to instruction, but it is wise to consider how to integrate or coordinate these approaches so that students are not presented with an overwhelming number of "conflict messages." Threads that can be meaningfully woven together across subjects, classes, or grades should be found or established so that children are exposed to a "tapestry" of learning. In general, current research suggests that schools should identify and explore approaches that move away from the over-use of worksheets and drill-and-practice exercises to more interactive strategies such as cross-age tutoring, cooperative learning, and computer-assisted instruction. These models are based on *how* services are provided.

Which Model to Choose? The predominance of the pull-out model for special programs such as Title I has resulted largely from the desire to comply with "separate and distinct" and "supplement, not supplant" requirements stated in the law over the years. However, the model selected — be it one of the models described above or a combination of any of them — should allow for the most effective instructional program in a specific setting. In fact, the research has shown that the mode of service delivery used is not so important to improving student performance as the *quality* of the curriculum and instruction provided.[4]

Table 7
Service Delivery Models

- Based on Setting
  - In-class
  - Pull-out
  - Modules
- Based on Extended Time
  - Add-on
- Based on Staffing Patterns
  - Aides
  - Resource Specialists
- Based on Instruction
  - Cross-age tutoring
  - Cooperative learning
  - CAI

Curriculum and Instruction

School improvement efforts should lead invariably to a consideration of the heart of the matter, i.e., the curriculum and the instructional approaches used in the school. A focus on curriculum and instruction is essential if school improvement efforts are to be effective. There is typically a need for extensive consideration of ideas and strategies suggested by the current research on effective instructional practices.

The 1988 *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) found that teachers use a narrower range of approaches with low-performing students than they do with students who

[4] Rowan, B. and Guthrie, L.F. (1989). *Quality of Chapter 1 Instruction: Results from a Study of 24 Schools*. San Francisco: Far West Laboratory.

perform well. In reading, for example, teachers are less likely to emphasize comprehension and critical thinking and more likely to focus on decoding strategies with poorer readers. In much of the research on classroom instruction, it is pointed out that instruction in "advanced skills" does not pervade the classroom. This has continued, in many cases, still to be true despite the language requiring it in Title I programs under the Hawkins-Stafford legislation of 1988.

. . . the research has shown that the mode of service delivery used is not so important to improving student performance as the quality of the curriculum and instruction provided.

The issuance of the research report, *Better Schooling for the Children of Poverty: Alternatives to Conventional Wisdom (1990)*, added valuable fuel to the fire of enthusiastic support for more effective alternative practices based on well-documented theory and research. Many other sources of information are available to guide and support efforts to update and redesign the curriculum and instructional programs of a school. One example is the report from a mini-conference sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) on curriculum trends for the next decade. Experts at that conference urged educators to take a number of steps to keep up with growing expectations for school graduates. Two of their recommendations were:

- Develop curriculum based on its ability to foster thoughtful student behavior.
- Make a rich, engaging curriculum available to *all* students. "We've got to undercut this utterly undemocratic myth that some students aren't capable of quality work."

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AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STAFF adopted one of the nationally known models for school restructuring and were now well-versed in its major tenets. Their student population is ethnically and linguistically diverse, and the staff recognized a need for a multicultural emphasis in their curricular and extra-curricular programs.

They began to build a knowledge base on Multicultural Education by examining how they could address the need for Multicultural Education through their restructuring efforts. Thus they used what they already knew well, to determine what additional knowledge they needed as they continued to improve their total school program. As they examined their school policies, parent involvement activities, and instructional and assessment programs, they

identified key areas for professional development for the staff. Multicultural Education became a uniting theme for the advancement of the school, and a new area of learning for the staff.

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Coordination

Although some schools are successfully providing coordinated instruction to their students, many are just beginning to consider ways to provide greater instructional coherence across programs, grade levels, and classrooms.

From its inception, Title I was designed as a program to provide *supplementary* instructional services. A lack of coordination is often similarly evident among bilingual, special education, and other special programs. This tradition often inhibits good communication practices among teachers.

It is important to emphasize that in schools and programs where students make the greatest achievement gains, a high degree of coordination has been noted. There is extensive information and resource support available for establishing a plan for effective coordination of services. Many of the procedures that are documented cost little and can be easily implemented. It is simply common sense to make sure that the various instructional programs in which students are placed during their school day are well integrated and work together for their benefit (Table 8). Any supplemental instruction provided should help them succeed in their regular program or help them make the necessary transitions from one class, subject, or grade level to another.

Table 8
Successful coordination builds from:

1. A common curriculum
2. Coordinated instruction
3. Systematic, on-going communication
4. Administrative leadership
5. An effective home-school partnership

Parent Involvement

Research has shown that regular and meaningful involvement of parents in the school improvement process can enhance that process and increase the likelihood of success. School staffs can gather parent support for their improvement efforts by expanding and systematizing opportunities for parents in the areas of assessment, planning, and program implementation.

. . . parent involvement is a process . . .

From the research and the experiences of many successful schools, we know that parent involvement is a *process* that differs from family to family, school to school, and program to program. However, there are several key elements that are common to effective programs whether they are rural or urban, large or small. Effective parent involvement:

. . . children do better as students when there is a considerable overlap in the school and family environments.

- is more than a series of activities;
- is well planned, comprehensive, and long lasting;
- fosters relationships between parents and children;
- encourages partnerships among schools, families, and community;
- enhances a successful program, but does not substitute for good teaching.

When we talk about involving "parents" in their children's education, we mean providing support for the individuals who are most likely to have an impact on a child's education. While in many cases that will be a parent, for many children, it may be a grandparent, custodial guardian, older sibling, or step-parent. What this means for schools is that we must begin to view parents as a heterogeneous group with a variety of needs, interests, and abilities whom we want to involve as partners in education.

What do we mean by the term "involvement"? Too often involvement is narrowly defined as a parent coming into school, i.e., the amount of parent involvement is measured by the number of parents who attend meetings, volunteer in school, and son on. But there are different ways in which parents can become involved in their child's education, and within these roles, there are several levels of activity that can indicate involvement. Involvement may be reflected by support at home–setting aside time to review school work, praising accomplishments, or supporting home learning activities. It may be reflected in participation at school meetings or in support of school or classroom events. Parents with the time or motivation may work with teachers or in a school resource room to learn some specific instructional strategies that they can use in a non-threatening manner with their children at home.

Schools and families are two spheres of influence in children's lives that operate simultaneously to educate and socialize children. These spheres of influence can overlap such that the messages, resources, and expectations are similar across settings, or the spheres can be relatively independent with two different codes of behavior.

Joyce Epstein's research (Johns Hopkins University) has shown that children do better as students when there is considerable overlap in the school and family environments.[5] Parents need not be teachers to share an educative function with schools. The key is that schools and families collaborate to pull the spheres of influence closer together.

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[5] Epstein, J. (1988). How do we improve programs for parent involvement? *Educational Horizons*, 66(2).

Evaluation and Assessment

Focusing on evaluation as a topic for attention in the school improvement plan does not imply simply selecting a different test for program evaluation. However, test selection *may* be a topic to consider, if there is a need to establish better alignment between the curriculum and the test. Similarly, if the test is out-of-date or if subtests are being used that do not seem to be appropriate measures for the instructional program, you may want to include test selection as a part of the improvement plan.

Consideration should be given to developing a comprehensive assessment system that will meet various purposes for collecting student achievement data and will use various approaches. While a norm-referenced test may be used for evaluation, think about alternative methods for gathering data about progress of students in the program. Assessment should be ongoing and curriculum-based. Determining whether an instructional program is having positive effects should not rest solely on a review of student test results obtained annually. Continuous monitoring of student progress is critical.

To monitor student progress, a variety of assessments can potentially be used or developed. These would include criterion-referenced measures, informal instruments, or alternative assessments. In addition to providing measures of student growth, they provide a set of *multiple measures* of student learning, a recommended evaluation procedure for any program.

In a reading program, alternative measures might include reading logs, written responses to reading (integrated reading/writing performance tasks), reading interviews, "think-aloud" protocols, retellings, story frames, reading miscue analyses, or running records. A math program might focus on the collection and analysis of written descriptions of the results of investigations, pictures and dictated reports for younger students, performance tasks, diagrams of problem-solving processes, graphic representations, reports, responses to open-ended questions, video, audio, or computer-generated examples of student work. In either case, these items might be collected into portfolios of student work that then include self-evaluations by students or evaluations by teachers or peers.

The options for additional evaluation measures are numerous, and they are extremely useful whether you are monitoring the achievement effects of your school improvement plan, or you are gathering data to plan instruction. The information gathered through alternative assessment measures can be used to:

Determining whether an instructional program is having positive effects should not rest solely on a review of student test results obtained annually.

- assess student learning needs,
- develop student program improvement plans,
- compare a student's progress in different program settings,
- assess advanced skills,
- evaluate achievement gains of students in early childhood programs,
- review progress of students with limited English proficiency, or
- engage in ongoing, consistent monitoring of student performance.

In short, using a variety of assessment measures including what are now referred to as alternative or performance-based assessments constitutes *good instructional practice.* The most important use of assessment data is to inform instruction and to provide regular feedback as to the success or potential success of your school improvement plan. It allows you to make revisions or course corrections as needs are clarified.

. . . using a variety of evaluation measures including what are now referred to as alternative or performance-based assessments constitutes good instructional practice.

Professional Development

The following statement by Michael Fullan captures the general thinking in the educational community with regard to staff development:

> *Staff development will never have its intended impact as long as it is grafted onto schools in the form of discrete, unconnected projects. The closer one gets to the culture of schools and the professional lives of teachers, the more complex and daunting the reform agenda becomes. More powerful strategies are needed for more powerful changes. At least three strands of the problem require radical rethinking and integration, namely, the individual, the school, and the district.*[6]

The last decade and a half have brought a virtual revolution in the amount of information available on the processes involved in learning, on reading and problem solving, and on the implications of this information for designing effective instruction. Generally speaking, much of the research stimulated by a variety of factors in recent years has contributed to a greatly enhanced understanding of the teaching/learning process. While there is still much that needs to be explored and examined, and much to be learned, there is an abundance of

[6] Fullan, M. (1985). Change processes and strategies at the local level. *Elementary School Journal,85*(3), 391-422.

information on which to act. It isn't, perhaps, that it is totally new information; others have put forth similar theories over many years. However, the information seems to be better grounded now and enjoys the support of a wide number of educators.

The challenge, then, is not only to get the information into the hands and minds of school faculties and administrators, but to help them effect the changes required to restructure, reformulate, or redesign academic programs for children. Although it is has been acknowledged for fifteen years that professional development is closely tied to successful innovation or improvement, the time that is required to bring about desired changes is generally underestimated.

The challenge is not only to get the information into the hands and minds of school faculties and administrators, but to help them effect the changes required to restructure, reformulate, or redesign academic programs for children.

Build a Network/Support System

Building a powerful knowledge base does not mean merely reviewing and discussing some useful research information. A second component in building a knowledge base includes building a network of individuals who can provide input and insight into various aspects of school improvement. Local support systems include the support group described above under Step I, **Prepare: Plan to Plan** — the school community, families, and other schools and districts in your area. State and other agencies and organizations can also serve as invaluable resources in the school improvement process. These individuals and organizations can offer feedback on components of the plan, provide resources, share ideas, or strengthen motivation. Remember, the leadership team should not work alone in developing the improvement plan — asking for assistance is part of the process.

Another aspect of a support system involves resources. It's important to identify the materials and resources necessary to develop a viable plan. For example, these resources may include computers and applicable software which will allow the team to "catalog" research or draw up plans.

Don't get buried . . .

If you have collected, reviewed, and/or discussed even a small part of the materials on the topics discussed in this section, you may begin to feel overwhelmed. Remember that the task is not to master or even review all of it. Remember also to divide responsibility for the task. Jigsaw activities, reading groups, and other such professional development activities could serve well in this capacity. Reading guides and other ideas are available from the Comprehensive Assistance Centers.

Consider only that this has given you a great opportunity to become more familiar with professional literature and other resources, that you have taken the time to reflect on and discuss them, and that this step, alone, has moved you much further along toward the goal of building better programs to support children's learning.

IV

Plan: Define a Vision and Develop Strategies

Define a Vision

Identify Actual/ Potential Barriers

Specify Strategies and Steps of Plan

Review and Refine Plan as Needed

So keep going...

IV Plan: Define a Vision and Develop Strategies

After a considerable amount of time spent preparing to plan—building a leadership team, assessing the situation, and gathering background information—one school's leadership team was at last ready to develop a plan. The team had felt confident that once this part of the process would be underway, everything would fall into place. However, this step soon proved to be much more complex than they first thought. Every time an idea was presented, there seemed to be an automatic response of "Yes, but . . ." or "That's not possible." or "It's too limited." There seemed to be too many things to accomplish and put into the plan, yet so few resources and a mountain of constraints. No one was sure how much time to spend on this phase of planning; they had assumed this was the easiest part, since they had spent so much time in preparation.

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Define a Vision

. . . Establish high expectations.

Any effective plan must begin with a vision, an image of what the outcome of the plan will be. A mission statement defines this vision and guides the planning process. Therefore, the first step in the planning stage is to build a mission statement. This can be tricky but is important. Often, an effective mission statement will be in the following format:

> Our mission is to . . . . to be achieved by . . . . which will result in . . . . .

The statement describes the mission, how it will be achieved, and what the intended outcomes are. A mission statement should, as educators well know, have a visionary tone; it should really address the lofty purposes of education. (There is the risk, of course, of becoming trite, using hackneyed expressions, or of being just plain corny, but in the final analysis, it is better to have thought in these terms than not. It is better to determine if you, indeed, have a vision of what you want to accomplish for children, or if you just haven't thought about it.)

The mission statement may go something like...

> *Our mission is to create a learning climate in our school that encourages all children to reach important educational goals and to achieve excellence and satisfaction in learning which will result in a greater sense of their individual worth.*

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It should not be reduced to something like...

Our mission is to help parents become more aware of the school program by having more parents attend parent meetings which will result in greater student achievement.

In general, it is important to understand that the improvement of a school as a whole requires an altered vision of what schooling is all about. It cannot simply be framed by changes that are designed to eliminate minor problems that cause the staff to be inconvenienced. While those changes may also be accomplished as part of the improvement process, the vision for a school, stated in part as schoolwide goals, must reflect a school's high expectations for its own performance and the behavior of its students, teachers, and the community. If we were once again to reflect on our example of the architect's retrofit of a house undertaken to make better use of solar energy, it can be readily understood that the architect would have a vision— even draw a sketch—of the intended outcome.

"The vision for a school...provides the staff with a common target for its effort, with a common destination for its journey, with a mutual focus for its search for creative and innovative solutions to its deficiencies, and with a shared ideal toward which activities can be mounted" (Hansen & Liftin, 1991).

Set Goals

After discussing the relative merits of all practices investigated (under **Learn: Build a Knowledge Base** above), comparing the utility/fit with local context, and building a vision, it is time to set goals or desired outcomes. Figure 2 represents a sample plan development worksheet that can serve as a tool to help you through the subsequent planning steps.

Goals guide improvement planning and serve as an ultimate standard for evaluating the effectiveness of the improvement effort. As with the vision, it is important to be clear. Several characteristics contribute to effective goal setting. Improvement goals should:

- be relatively few in number in order to build the potential for early success;
- focus on specific aspects of the school and its programs;
- build on identified strengths while improving areas in need of improvement;
- be written in terms of student achievement outcomes;
- include specific (multiple) measures or indicators of achievement outcomes;
- include a timeline for achieving the goals; and

Figure 2
Sample Plan
Development Worksheet

Plan Development Worksheet		**Goal__ of ___**
Goal		
Area of Focus		
Does the goal build on a strength?	YES or NO	
Does the goal address a weakness?	YES or NO	
Is the goal written in terms of student outcomes?	YES or NO	
Deadline		
Resources Available:	Actual Barriers:	
1.	1.	
2.	2.	
3.	3.	
4.	4.	
5.	5.	
6.	6.	
Resources Needed:	Potential Barriers:	
1.	1.	
2.	2.	
3.	3.	
4.	4.	
5.	5.	
6.	6.	

Strategy:		
	Person Responsible	**Deadline**
Specific Action Steps		
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		
11.		
12.		
How will you know that you are making progress?		
What will be your benchmarks?		
How will you know this goal has been achieved?		
How will you determine this?		

- include ways for determining if specific goals were met.

While goals need to be realistic, it is important to be bold. Worrying about constraints at the goal-setting stage will limit what you are able to accomplish.

Table 9
Steps to Developing a Plan

Define Vision
↓
Set Goals
↓
Identify Barriers
↓
Specify Strategies
Specific Tasks
Necessary Resources
Timeline
Monitoring and Evaluation
↓
Review and Refine

Identify Actual/Potential Barriers

Once goals are set, actual and potential barriers need to be identified in order to incorporate into the plan steps for overcoming them. There may exist district-level constraints, such as budget allowances or policy. The school may also present hurdles, such as a staff seemingly unwilling to change. Other barriers may stem from the community, such as lack of resources. However, while these constraints are real, in no way does this imply that they cannot be addressed in a creative and effective manner.

One important barrier to avoid is the one that involves placing blame. Examples include blaming students' families or limited experiences, finding fault with administrators or past decisions, attributing difficulties to staffing changes, lamenting the lack of resources, and on and on. If the tendency is to place the blame on student "differences" in native language or culture, it is important to alter the perception of these differences to see them as strengths on which to build. If the tendency is to assign blame in other ways, it is important to shift that energy back to a consideration of the opportunity that is being presented to make constructive changes in the school program—always in the best interest of children. The goal is to find keystones on which to build and use in determining how to move from the vision to action plans. Steps to overcoming barriers should be part of the plan and need to be specified.

Specify Strategies and Steps of Plan

Vision defined, goals set, resources and barriers identified—it is now time to specify strategies and actual steps of the improvement plan. A strategy describes a general method which will involve multiple means or activities to respond to identified need(s) and corresponding improvement goals. Strategies may focus on:

- Developing staff capabilities;
- Implementing alternative instructional delivery models;
- Improving instructional approaches;
- Coordinating the scope and sequence of the curriculum;
- Coordinating the core curriculum with special instruction;
- Promoting a positive school climate;

- Providing appropriate support services;
- Fostering parent involvement; or
- Enhancing leadership.

Once the strategies are defined, it is important to continue the plan by specifying special needs such as curriculum, equipment, facilities and other resources. Moreover, staff development requirements, other training needs, and technical assistance should be outlined as well.

Timelines are an important part of any improvement plan. Timelines will map out progress to be achieved in a given time period and can provide feedback on whether or not goals are being met. An essential part of timelines are benchmarks and milestones — a set of specific goals to be achieved by a given date with descriptions of the desired results. These are indicators of how well you are doing and offer the opportunity to revisit the plan and make revisions or corrections as needed.

A final part of the plan to develop involves feedback: monitoring and evaluation. A good plan outlines steps for monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes. No plan is complete without specifying how evaluation data will be gathered, what tools will be used and how results will be analyzed. Step VI, **Monitor: How are You Doing?** and Step VII, **Evaluate: How Did You Do?** will elaborate these important steps.

To summarize, a plan should include the following elements:

1. Program goal(s),
2. Ways of overcoming potential/actual barriers, the strategies associated with the goals,
3. The tasks and activities associated with the strategies
4. The dates when tasks will be implemented and dates of completion,
5. Steps for monitoring and evaluating progress and outcomes,
6. Personnel responsibility, and the
7. Resources which will be required.

Table 10

A plan should include:

- program goals
- ways of overcoming barriers
- strategies
- tasks and activities
- timeline
- monitoring and evaluation steps
- identification of personnel responsible
- required resources

Review and Refine Plan as Needed

School improvement is a continuous, iterative process. It is important as you move through the planned activities of your plan that you review it and revise where necessary. Research has found that strong school-level improvement plans exhibit the following "truths":

- Curriculum and instruction are primary targets of the plan.
- Goals relate directly to problem area(s).

- Problem area(s) identified on basis of thorough, objective program analyses.
- Improvement goal(s)/plan are determined by consensus of all relevant parties.
- Strategies and activities reflect effective instructional practices.
- Strategies and activities relate directly to improvement goals.
- Strategies and activities are integrated and sustained.
- Implementation is continually monitored for problems, feedback, adjustments.
- Administrative pressure/support ensures initial and continuing plan operation.
- Engaging in an improvement process allows for more effective coordination of programs.

Review these statements and determine whether or not they apply to your plan. If any do not, your plan may not be complete. Review your plan and identify elements to refine as needed. However, do not get stuck at this stage. No plan is *perfect*. It's simply not possible to consider all contingencies or foresee all issues that may emerge. Worrying about finding a solution for a barrier or problem that seemingly has no solution will stifle the whole plan. Moving forward with a plan that is fairly satisfying and encouraging to those involved is better than not moving at all. Often solutions to sticky problems will present themselves along the way.

SO KEEP GOING...

V

Implement: Move Forward

Structure the Environment for Change and Generate Support

Monitor and Provide Opportunity for Feedback

Stay Motivated . . .

V Implement: Move Forward

"WE CAN GIVE OURSELVES a well-deserved round of applause. We've got ourselves a plan," said the principal, team leader for the planning effort. She wanted to say more, but couldn't be heard over the roar of the audience made up of staff, parents and community members. Throughout the room, people were smiling and shaking hands. There were some teary eyes as well. The school community, with a strong, hard-working leadership team had pulled it together. After months of planning, discussing, reviewing, and revising, the school had a plan of which everyone could be proud. Suddenly, someone said, "Yes, but now we have to *do* it." There was nervous laughter all around. Up to this point, the planning team had assumed implementation would come "naturally" after the plan was completed. They were coming to the realization that it wasn't a matter of flipping a light switch, and things would be set into motion.

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Developing the plan required intensive effort and commitment. Working through the writing of the plan was no small accomplishment. But now it's time for *implementation* — moving from concepts on paper to concepts in action. Implementation, however, is not the "end" of the process, *and* it is not as easy as it appears. Imagine that you have just built a new and improved car that will get you to your destination more efficiently. It won't move by itself. It not only needs a skilled driver, but people who know how to maintain it, people who know the road leading to your destination — no matter how many detours — and people who know where to get spare parts to keep it running. Similarly, an improvement plan will not bring about change — move you toward your goals — without continued efforts from the leadership team and others who support it. While described here as a single step, implementation is not a phase alone. It will continue on to evaluation. Implementation and the next step, monitoring, overlap. Implementation will take as much effort and team work as writing the plan itself. There are several key strategies to consider to ensure successful implementation (Table 11).

Table 11
Implementation Strategies

- Structure environment for change.
- Generate support.
- Provide opportunity for feedback.
- Stay motivated.

Structure the Environment for Change and Generate Support

It is important to generate support and maintain commitments in order to ensure smooth implementation and continued support. In this effort, professional development can serve to increase understanding of, and commitment to, the plan's goals and strategies. By professional development, we mean more than an informational meeting. These meetings serve their purpose and play an important part of this step, but professional development should go beyond information sharing. People can be resistant to change, or — stated more positively - they need to be well-informed in order to make changes. Therefore, it is important to remain vigilant to the level of staff morale and remain open to feedback. Implement elements of the plan as it is possible and reasonable to do so. Setting the stage for success will help to ensure success.

The ultimate goal in school improvement is to develop a learning organization that will help students learn what they need to know to function as productive citizens in the future. Teachers must understand and use a variety of instructional and assessment strategies; they must be able to adjust these strategies to meet the needs of their students; they must be able to assess the impact of their actions on students; and they must be able to help students become motivated learners and self-assessors.

Schools committed to continuously improving their processes and comprehensively implementing the school vision would do well to adopt implementation support strategies at the teacher level. These support strategies might include any kind of peer collaboration such as peer coaching — the pairing of teachers to work together to establish plans, to observe each other implementing specific elements, and to provide feedback to each other. They might also include collaborative teacher research — establishing hypotheses and studying the impact of the specific implementation efforts. Or it might mean working with staff-developed performance measures for accountability and direction in implementation that indicate where the whole staff and individual teachers are in the implementation process. Failure to build in support strategies is one of the most common reasons plans are not fully implemented (Bernhardt, 1994).

Monitor and Provide Opportunity for Feedback

Remember that the implementation of an improvement plan is not an all-or-nothing process. ***Implement what you can when you can***. Gather data as you go along, and review, reassess, revise, or recycle as you gain new insights. If a strategy

isn't working, review it or rework it, but don't let it affect other components of the plan. If we returned to a consideration of the architect developing and implementing a retrofit plan, we could easily see that a snag might occur when she discovers that the material she planned on using for the storage of passive solar energy was not available in the region or was extraordinarily costly. In that situation, she would pursue a new material or design a different strategy for accomplishing the goal. The project can still be accomplished; it will just be done with an unexpected twist and as a result of the application of some creativity. The same is true for your improvement plan. Don't throw the whole thing out because some aspect is not working out as anticipated.

Give staff and others involved — directly or indirectly — the opportunity to provide feedback. As in planning, showing individuals that their opinions and efforts are valued will make the difference between successful implementation and a plan that seems to have gone nowhere. In addition, the leadership team may not always be the ones directly involved in implementing the plan, and therefore, feedback from others will be invaluable in monitoring how the plan is working.

It may help you to consider the following highlights from research on successful implementation:

- Leadership is provided.
- Improvement efforts meet local needs and fit local conditions.
- Those asked to alter practice are in some way involved in all phases of design/planning.
- Improvement results in visible outcomes, often in the short run.
- Support is evidenced by school and district administrators.
- Professional development is provided as needed to strengthen use of effective practices (methods may include demonstration lessons, joint instructional planning, visits to successful programs, attending conferences, and so on).
- Improvement effort is explicitly managed and monitored.
- Local resources are allocated for improvement.
- Ongoing assistance is provided.
- Incentives are provided.
- Positive administrative-staff relations exist.

If, in monitoring the implementation of the plan (changes or activities included in the program and anticipated outcomes as described in Step VI), you discover indications that things are not going well or as anticipated, it will be worth the time to do a quick review of the list of highlights above to determine if

Gather data as you go along, and review, reassess, revise, or recycle as you gain new insights.

the absence of any of these factors is hindering implementation. Then work together to find ways to resolve the issues.

Stay Motivated...

While implementation means moving forward, a step or two back doesn't mean failure. If, while driving, you notice that you have taken a wrong turn, do you stop and leave the car there, or do you back up until you find the road that will get you to your destination? It's important not to become discouraged. Setbacks — large or small — can seem like giant obstacles, but don't let this keep you from moving. Always keep moving.

VI Monitor: How Are You Doing?

VI Monitor: How Are You Doing?

IT HAD BEEN THREE MONTHS since they had begun implementing, but things weren't working as they had planned. The leadership team had come together to determine "what went wrong." There were many long faces in the group; they felt they had failed. One of the fifth-grade teachers spoke first. "It seems a bit depressing right now, but we planned for this. Remember?" They all turned to look at her. "What do you mean we 'planned' for this?" asked the principal. The teacher pointed out that part of their plan included steps for monitoring the implementation process, that is, if anything wasn't working as expected, it would give the team time to reflect on new directions to take. While no one was happy about the turn of events, they felt better after being reminded that they had time to alter the plan based on the new information.

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Monitoring and evaluation are more than an exercise. The basic purpose for monitoring and evaluation is to provide information for action and informed decision-making. Monitoring a school improvement plan could happen in two ways:

1. Monitoring of planned changes or activities included in the improvement plan.
2. Monitoring of anticipated outcomes of the plan, e.g., student performance or level of parent involvement.

Both of these types should be addressed as you consider the steps listed below. Monitoring is essential for determining if aspects of the improvement plan are being carried out as intended. It really constitutes the formative evaluation of the plan. Various forms of data can be collected for this process. Expected positive outcomes depend on the integrity with which the improvement process, activities, and components are implemented. In addition, if the plan is being carried out, but the program does not appear to be working, it is through monitoring processes that areas for change become evident before full implementation or too much time has passed.

Monitoring (and evaluation) can only occur, however, if it is explicitly included as part of the improvement process and is related directly to the goals of the plan. A process for monitoring should be established that is clear to the leadership team and to anyone who will serve as an informant or provide data. A timeline should be specified, and those responsible for

Monitoring is essential for determining if aspects of the school improvement plan are being carried out as intended.

gathering and reviewing information should be identified. It is useful to consider the following steps in monitoring the plan (highlighted in Table 12).

Table 12
Steps in Monitoring Plan

- Select areas of the improvement plan to monitor and evaluate.
- Determine what questions you want answered.
- Identify how and what information you will collect.
- Think about how you will use the information.

Select areas of the school improvement plan to monitor and evaluate at various times. Components of your plan may focus on program design, curriculum and instruction, coordination, parent involvement, staff development, or assessment. In each of these areas, there may be one or more activities designed to promote improvement. Make decisions about which aspects to review and when. These decisions should follow from a consideration of which aspects are most important and most in need of monitoring. For example, if a goal of the improvement plan is to improve instruction in reading and the strategy for this goal was to provide inservice to teachers, then monitoring could take place at different points in time:

- **Before inservice:** Is the assistance that will be offered to teachers going to be useful? Are teachers aware of the training, and how do they feel about it? Is there lack of support for this idea? If so, does this mean abandoning it or working on staff motivation first?
- **During the time of inservice:** Were teachers provided with adequate training and information? Will they be able to use this information and translate it into classroom practice, or is a follow-up session necessary?
- **Some time after the inservice:** Is there evidence of improved instructional strategies? How is that determined? If there is little change, what are the next steps?

Determine what questions you want answered. Asking the right questions allows you to gather information about almost anything you want to know about the project. How do students feel about new instructional approaches? Do teachers and assistants feel that inservice training has been useful? Are students reading more books? Have math problem-solving skills improved? The most useful questions are ones that are clearly stated, specific, and relevant to those who make decisions. If they are too vague or general, they will be difficult to answer, and the results may be useless. In clarifying the questions, it is also a good idea to anticipate possible outcomes. The answer to a question is useless if there is nothing you can do about it.

Identify how and what information you will collect to answer your questions. This step takes a lot of thought and planning. You don't want to end up with stacks of useless information and your evaluation questions unanswered. You also must be sure that your sample of information is not so small or restricted that you make judgments or decisions that

are based on information that is too limited. For example, if you want to know if the 12 instructional assistants in your program are applying information they gained from a training program, it is not enough to have feedback from three of them. In other words, one needs a representative sample that is large enough to provide reliable information.

Review informational sources and check with your local Comprehensive Assistance Center for help in finding, reviewing, and selecting methods and instruments for collecting appropriate information to answer the questions you have defined. Some suggestions are provided below:

- *Ask staff.* Use oral or written surveys or informal discussions.
- *Examine materials.* If new resources, programs, or materials have been purchased, review them as a team to assess their quality and whether or not they appear to be adequate for the strategy you defined in your plan. For example, if you indicated that there needed to be a greater emphasis on advanced skills in the instructional program, and someone else had the responsibility of selecting and purchasing materials, you may determine that they are not really satisfactory for accomplishing the goal.
- *Observe teachers/students.* If practices like clearer instruction, smoother transitions between instructional activities, greater use of positive recognition are in your plan, then you may need to do periodic observations of the practices in action to see if progress is being made.
- *Ask students.* If practices have a direct and visible effect on students, ask them if they think practices are changing and how well they are working. Check their attitudes about the instruction they receive. Ask them for suggestions for improvement.
- *Review various types of data about children's learning.* Don't wait for the results of the annual required evaluation to determine if the program improvement plan has had the desired positive effect on student achievement.
- *Use multiple techniques.* Focus monitoring efforts on the most important or pivotal strategies.

Think about how you will use the information that you collect. Evaluation data needs to be summarized and reduced into a concise and usable format without sacrificing important detail. Sources of data may include surveys or questionnaires, observations, existing records, interviews, or student performance assessments. Often the information needs to be presented to others who may not have been involved in the collection process or who need to participate in the decision-

making process. The important aspect is to generate recommendations or make decisions about the program, and these should be grounded in a careful review of the information.

Are we doing all that we said we would do, as we said we would do it, when we said we would do it?

Monitoring and formative data can be critical to program success. They are important for keeping informed of progress by answering the question, "How are we doing in regard to our program improvement plan?" In other words, "Are we doing *all* that we said we would do, *as* we said we would do it, *when* we said we would do it?" This type of data should also help in determining the need for refining program plans or for identifying barriers that hinder the full implementation and success of the school improvement plan. In addition, the information can play a direct role in further planning. Making thoughtful decisions based on data is critical to increasing the effectiveness of any school program.

VII Evaluate: How Did You Do?

VII Evaluate: How Did You Do?

"WHERE DO WE BEGIN?" asked some teachers. "What's the point? Why are we doing this?" asked others. "Who is going to see and use the information?" asked parents and some students. These and other similar questions were being asked as the evaluation process was getting underway. After a long two years — one for planning and the second for implementing — it seemed difficult to muster the energy to do an evaluation. It had not been adequately detailed in the plan, and now the leadership team was at a loss as to where to start.

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A continuously improving learning organization uses evaluation to understand the impact and effectiveness of its actions; to ensure the congruence and synergy of the elements of its vision; and to determine how well new strategies have been implemented, with the overall goal of improving processes, products, and procedures in an ongoing fashion.

Evaluation is necessary for making judgments about the quality of the school and its programs for assessing progress toward the attainment of goals. Summative evaluation occurs at the conclusion of the program year. Information from these evaluations provides direction for ongoing program modification and future program planning.

There are different methods for gathering evaluation data (Table 13). All may have been used in some form or another during the assessment phase of the improvement planning process. However, this time, the data will be used to determine the effectiveness of the improvement plan, answering the question, "How did we do?" In other words, "Did we do what we set out to do?"

As is often noted, norm-referenced tests provide only one type of information about student achievement, and generally the information reflects a narrow sampling of the domain of interest. To really understand or get a picture of student achievement, it is widely recommended that other assessment procedures — both formal and informal — be used. These may be included in a "system of assessment" developed by the district — with options and strategies identified. They may also be part of a school-developed assessment system that focuses on classroom assessments used as an ongoing part of instruction.

Summative data should not be limited to achievement or assessment data alone. Other methods can be used to gather data to evaluate progress and examine if change has occurred,

Table 13
Summative Data to Gather for Evaluation

- Test scores; progress toward desired outcomes
- Staff, parent, and student surveys and interviews
- Observations
- Self-assessments

Did we do what we set out to do?

how much change has occurred, and the quality of the change. Surveys and interviews can be used to gather opinions on all aspects of school operations from administrators, special program staff, the regular program teachers, parents, and students. Observations of classroom activities and teacher strategies can be conducted to gather first-hand evaluation of what is actually going on. In addition, using self-assessment worksheets can provide valuable information as well, particularly if the data is used to compare to the earlier assessments in Step II.

As in previous steps, the data gathered during evaluation can move you toward a profile of the program. Again, this can be used to compare to the earlier profiles. Has it changed? If so, how? If not, why not? Are the changes positive? What occurred that was not anticipated? What can you learn form this? What are the implications for next year?

As is the case during monitoring, it is important to determine who will collect the data, who will interpret it, and who will review it. It is equally important to avoid pitfalls such as: (1) having a compliance mindset toward evaluation; (2) failing to adequately plan monitoring and evaluation procedures; and (3) being uncertain about how to interpret and use the data collected in the evaluation process. Staff development and involvement in the evaluation process and assistance from external consultants can help to prevent these problems from occurring. A well-designed monitoring and evaluation plan will result in information and a process that helps to ensure success and to reduce resistance to change.

A continuously improving learning organization understands the impact each element has upon the other. In conjunction with evaluation data, it determines what to improve and makes those improvements on an ongoing basis. Continuous improvement is an unending process.

It is useful for schools to have a framework to help them start right so they can get to the point of implementing and sustaining improved practices. A framework can help schools understand the overall process of school change, how to think through what to improve, how to improve, how to implement the improvement, and then how to know that the improvement is making a difference.

A framework for school improvement can take the form of a portfolio, *a school portfolio*. A school portfolio is a purposeful collection of work telling the story of a school. A school portfolio describes efforts to engender and maintain systemic and continuous school improvement and exhibits the school goals, vision, plans, and progress (Bernhardt, 1994).

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TEACHERS IN A SCHOOL WITH A LARGE POPULATION of Hispanic students initially felt that there was not much more they could do for the students than what they were already doing. After all, the parents were not much involved and "really didn't care." As indicators, teachers reported that families spent as much as an extra month in Mexico at Christmas, did not help at school functions, and allowed their children to miss school often. As a part of their data gathering for the *school portfolio* they were developing, teachers discovered what happens to the students when they leave their school. They were alarmed at the treatment they were given — non-fluent English speaking students were placed in special education classes and/or tracked so they would never have opportunities to go to college or to develop career skills. The teachers were overwhelmed by the evidence that they themselves had much to do with keeping the situation the way it was. They realized that they were the ones who could make the difference in these children's lives and perhaps with the impressions the families had of school. They used what they found out to re-think their improvement plan. Two years later, the school was a more nurturing place for students. For the first time ever, students felt they belonged at the school, and surprisingly their majority migrant families stopped migrating (fathers would leave and come back) in order for the students to stay at the school.

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Keeping a school portfolio can help to guide the improvement of what is most important to the overall school organization and will reflect the multidimensionality of each unique school organization. It will simplify the evaluation of schools–which are by nature complex organizations–by offering a means to monitor the parts and their interrelationships as they compose the whole. The school portfolio will assist schools in gaining deep understanding of their elements and processes, what needs to be improved and why, how the school plans to carry out the improvement efforts, the expected outcomes of the approach to improvement, the efforts to implement the plan, and the results of the effort. A school portfolio provides a view of the big picture of all the elements and shows how they interrelate to make a whole. A school portfolio allows for the

continuous collection and assessment of evidence and is always evolving, growing, improving, and enabling schools to make better decisions.

Purpose and uses of a school portfolio

Among the most important purposes of a school portfolio are the need to:

Establish one document that describes an overall school plan, and the school's mission, vision, beliefs, and rationale for improvement.

Too often schools wrestle with many different school plans, each designed to meet the requirements of a particular regulatory agency, program, or grant. Until these plans are coalesced into one plan–understood and supported by staff–the school's vision will not be achievable. A school portfolio helps maintain *one* overall school plan congruent with the school vision.

Document efforts on a number of elements important to school improvement.

A school portfolio is a physical entity used to document the depth, breadth, and growth of a comprehensive school reform effort. The school portfolio is flexible and allows many different schools and programs to concentrate on important areas at different times as necessary.

Understand the complexities of the school organization.

By identifying and documenting change related to the elements and processes of their school, school staff begin to understand the complex elements that make up the school and the interrelationships of the elements. This understanding is necessary to uncover root causes of problems, to discover solutions, and to ensure the congruence of the elements within the whole.

Provide readily accessible and necessary information for data-based decision-making.

A comprehensive school portfolio includes data about the school–its population, facilities, resources, test scores, self-assessment results–as well as the school's vision for the future. This data provides the context for all aspects of the school improvement effort.

Reflect on progress and purpose.

One thing that keeps staff motivated to work on the enormous task of systemic reform is a periodic review of the progress they have made. A school portfolio allows staff to see what they have achieved, shares the benefits of their hard work, reminds them of where they were when they started and why they are making the changes they are working so hard to make. People are more willing to continue to work hard when they can see the benefits of their efforts.

Trouble-shoot the continuous improvement efforts of the school.

The school portfolio visually chronicles the progress (or lack of progress) made in each element of the school improvement process in text, graphs, charts, and pictures. This information helps a school staff decide where to focus efforts needed to increase the effectiveness of their actions. Additionally, the school portfolio can be used to identify elements incongruent with the school's vision, mission, outcomes, and plan which deter the progress of the school's improvement efforts.

Assess and guide the school's unique approach to continuous improvement.

Using a multifaceted school portfolio approach, staff can monitor the improvement process against established criteria. These criteria are useful for self-assessment and as guides for determining next steps toward the outcome. The portfolio approach and use of criteria provide for the assessment of progress on the individual elements as well as on the combination of elements that make up a comprehensive school improvement plan. The assessment is multidimensional–like schools–and, flexible, and, therefore more extensive, relevant, and consequently, more useful than relying solely on unidimensional product assessments, such as test scores.

Be Accountable.

A comprehensive school portfolio documents action plans, effort, and products which are assessed on a regular basis, demanding a high level of accountability.

Communicate.

A comprehensive school portfolio effectively serves as a public record to communicate important information about the

school, its purpose, mission and vision, the values and beliefs held by staff, its plans for improvement, the reasons particular approaches have been chosen, and the results of the school improvement efforts. The portfolio is an effective way to keep school district officials informed of school improvement efforts and progress, and helps to maintain district support. The school portfolio also effectively communicates to potential partners basic information about the school, the steps in the school improvement process, and how potential partners can contribute to the effort.

Replace a local, state, or regional accreditation process.

Because school portfolios are comprehensive and focus on an inclusive plan for school improvement, they are being used successfully in place of traditional evaluation and accreditation processes. Accrediting agencies and state departments of education are beginning to acknowledge that working with discrete elements of a school plan in program reviews can actually keep schools from making progress towards their vision. For instance, we found that when some schools prepare for program reviews focused on one state curriculum framework, the comprehensive continuous improvement efforts and work toward the achievement of their vision had to stop completely for up to a year. Alternatively, a school, focused on implementing one school vision and one comprehensive school plan congruent with that vision, is poised to achieve its vision.

Epilogue

In 1994, the *Elementary and Secondary School Act* was reauthorized by the U.S. Congress. Significant changes were made to the existing law. The new law provides increased flexibility tied to increased local accountability. With a goal of setting high standards for all children and providing the support to schools that will be necessary to help children reach those standards, it is clear that the need for continuous examination of schools and programs for purposes of improving them will remain a priority.

The requirement for school improvement to ensure optimum learning for all children is an essential part of the law, as indicated by its title, *Improving America's Schools Act of 1994*. It is widely acknowledged that such improvement will only occur through collaborative efforts and through generous support of teachers through professional development. These themes are strongly emphasized in *Focus* as ones that will serve us all well as we strive to create schools where all children have a chance to be successful learners. While educators clearly do not have all of the answers — much still needs to be learned, for example, about how to effectively assess children's learning — we do know a great deal now about what instructional approaches have the most positive effects on learning. The statement that was made in 1985 in the report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* — while it applies to reading instruction — applies equally well to instruction in general:

The knowledge is now available to make worthwhile improvements in (reading) throughout the United States. If the practices seen in the classrooms of the best teachers in the best schools could be introduced everywhere, improvements in (reading...in learning, in instruction...) would be dramatic.

Researchers have pointed out that the reasons "restructuring" has not worked in most schools is because crucial elements have been missing from the process, such as a solid plan or direction for change, personal meaning, a shared vision, incentives for change, learning opportunities for educators, "possibility thinking," effective communication, and an evaluation or monitoring system — the latter tending to be the element most often missing.

For real and appropriate changes to be implemented, the staff within a school must:

- conduct comprehensive needs analyses of students, teachers and the school community;
- develop a shared vision, based on the values and beliefs, and personal visions of the individuals in the school community; and
- establish a governance structure to support the bottom-up approach.

Then, utilizing this information, they must develop a comprehensive action plan to:

- increase teachers' repertoire of skills and understanding;
- include the community as true partners;
- evaluate the impact of new strategies; and
- establish a plan for continuous improvement.

These new ways of thinking and operating require strong teachers and principals capable of new levels of communication — who know from the start that there is no ending point, that the work is hard, that school improvement must go on continuously.

This is the challenge before us, and it is our hope that this school improvement planning guide will help you in some small part on that journey.

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